# ASHER JUPITER WAR

An Owner novel

**TOR** 

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# The Good Will of the People

It can been seen that, despite her brutal treatment of anyone who ever stood in her way, Serene Galahad's reign was still contingent on the good will of the people of Earth. However, the knowledge of the 'common man' was limited; he thought that Alan Saul had attacked Earth and released the Scour – the pandemic that annihilated nearly half of Earth's population of eighteen billion – almost certainly killing someone the common man knew. Under Serene Galahad that same common man seemed to have acquired more personal freedom and more material wealth, while his ruler apparently strove to avenge his losses. Of course, he did not know that the greater freedom he enjoyed was due to Saul wiping out Committee infrastructure and frying a large proportion of those who had formerly wielded the whip. Nor did he understand that his greater material wealth was precisely because the Scour had killed billions of his fellows. Nor did he realize that Serene Galahad was entirely responsible for the Scour. The gratitude he felt for his current ruler was unwarranted, and the sense of motivation that had him turning up at the factory gates early was based on a lie. This sort of ignorance, unfortunately, has been the lot of the common man since the dawn of time.

# Earth

The sun was shining on what had been Chairman Messina's small patch of Tuscan countryside. There were lemons on some of the trees and green oranges on others, while below them carefully tended succulents had opened red, orange, white and yellow flowers to the morning sun. Light glinted brightly off an all-chrome shepherd as it strode on patrol near the fence, and razorbirds roosting on a watchtower could almost be mistaken for seagulls. But all this brightness seemed just a veneer over blackness to Serene Galahad.

As her limousine drew up beside the building, Serene felt that its dressing of stone and red pantiles, concealing its recent lineage, was merely a façade of a similar nature, but one that covered failure. She stepped out of her vehicle before Sack, her dehumanized lizard-skin bodyguard, could open the door for her, and she pushed her sunglasses up onto her hair. Already the troops from the two armoured cars were piling out and heading for the two entrances – and going in fast, their instructions clear.

'It should just take a few minutes,' Sack informed her, looming at her side.

She shrugged, not really concerned, and continued to survey her surroundings without interest. Coming from inside the building she could hear shouting, a scream, the sound of glass breaking. Of course it wasn't necessary for her to be here for this, but maybe it could bring her back into focus; maybe this was the remedy she required. Eventually, just as the shepherd disappeared from sight behind some olive trees, Sack told her, 'They're ready.'

She began walking towards the main entrance, Sack still at her shoulder and two armoured guards moving ahead. One of

the guards held the door open for her while the other one moved on into the corridor beyond. Meanwhile, Sack drew his antiquated automatic and proceeded with it pointing down at his side. There was no need, because no one here – except her troops – was armed. The staff here had all been thoroughly vetted, and none of them would even consider violence against her . . . until it was too late. She moved on past a room full of computers and wall-spanning information screens, another room containing tiers of shelves crammed with old paper files, but with search-and-sort robots, looking like the offspring of document scanners and spiders, crawling along the shelves. And finally she came to a door outside which four of her troops had already gathered.

Serene paused as they moved aside; she glanced at a smear of blood on the floor and wondered if some of those working here might have guessed in advance, or had just been a bit too tardy in following orders. She looked up at the sign on the door, which announced 'Tactical', the smaller text below this reading 'Data Acquisition, Collation and Assessment – Positive Response Planning'. She snorted, then reached down and extracted her new Black Oval palmtop from its pouch at her belt.

'Ma'am?' Sack enquired, gesturing towards the door.

She nodded and he opened it for her; she strode on through.

The entire staff of this main tactical unit was present in the room. Some were seated at consoles, but most were herded back against the far wall. Near the door, some desks had been shoved over to one side, leaving just one, the chair behind it facing the room. Troops stood watchfully to either side of it.

Serene moved into the room, pulled out the chair and sat, placing her palmtop carefully before her, tapping it once and watching in satisfaction as it hinged open, expanded its film

screen and projected a keyboard onto the desk surface. She reached out but, anticipating her, it had already called up the list of the thirty-four personnel here which she had been looking at earlier.

'Merrick Myers,' she stated, looking up.

The woman was clearly reluctant to come forward, but others moved aside quickly and someone behind her gave her a shove.

'Ma'am,' said Myers, achieving a ridiculous mix of bow and curtsey.

'You are the officer in charge here,' Serene declared, 'but the blame cannot be wholly attributed to you. Your final assessments for submission to me are made up from a collation of data and assessments gathered from other tactical units. It is the case that what you present to me can only be as good as the data you receive.'

Myers looked quite relieved to hear this and seemed about to say something, but Serene held up a hand to cut her off and continued, 'Nevertheless, the fact remains that, despite having the best data and tactical programs available, along with the application of the minds of a total of four thousand two hundred and three tactical analysts "Tactical" still got it wrong.'

'Ma'am, if I could—'

'You will be silent!' Galahad spat. Then, after a pause to calm herself. 'Time and time again your "tactical assessments" underestimated Alan Saul. The failure of Tactical is no small matter. You have allowed the greatest mass-murderer in human history to escape our grasp. And because of that you have also jeopardized the future of Earth. We still do not have the Gene Bank samples and data that would enable us to regenerate Earth's ecosystem.'

Serene found herself growing irate again as she mentally

reviewed what she had just said, and as doubt nibbled at her certainty. Was the blame really all theirs? Yes, of course it was, damn it! She had done everything she could and, as had been the case throughout human history, had been let down by her advisers. She could only work with what she *knew*. It was their *fault*.

Serene flicked to another list and then fed that into a particular program. This was a random selection of ten per cent of other tactical personnel in places like this, both on Earth and in orbit – a number that rounded up to three hundred and eighty-six.

'This cannot go unpunished,' Serene continued. 'However, I am not so stupid as to allow such a punishment to destroy or cripple an important resource. I have therefore chosen a method suitable to our location here in Italy: I am using the old punishment called decimation.' She set the program running, watched a loading bar appear, rise to its maximum and then disappear.

'For those of you unacquainted with the word, decimation was how Roman commanders punished troops guilty of cowardice or rebellion. One in ten was selected and killed.' She now went back to her previous list of those here and fed that into the same program as well, but paused it with the parameters set. 'Right now, three hundred and eighty-six of your fellow tactical analysts both on Earth and in orbit are learning what their strangulation collars are for.'

At this announcement many in the crowd before her reached up to finger the hoops of bright metal fastened around their necks. As was usual in this sort of situation, they were seeing or hearing others being punished and assumed this was an object lesson for them; that this time they had escaped.

'Here, gathered before me,' said Serene, 'I have the cream

of Tactical – the best analysts and programmers available – and I cannot blithely kill off one in ten of you.'

Ah, the relief in their expressions . . .

'Your failure is almost of an order of magnitude worse than that of your fellows, therefore you are all going to die.'

It took them a moment to realize what she had just said, a moment for them to begin to protest and mill like sheep being circled by wolves, and just a moment for Serene to set the program running again. Some of them began screaming and protesting, those seated leaped out of their chairs, and all of them groped ineffectually at their now closing collars. A couple ran towards her, the man ridiculously wielding a litter bin. Sack's automatic cracked twice, both head shots, one lifting the top of the man's scalp and the other hitting the woman's nose before exiting in a spray of brains and bone behind her. They both went down, and behind them computers crashed to the floor, as desks and chairs were overturned in a writhing and choking mass of dying humanity.

Serene turned to Sack. 'That wasn't really necessary, now, was it?'

'My apologies, ma'am,' he replied woodenly.

Serene took in the look of horror on the faces of some of the troops, though most remained hard faced and unreadable. It occurred to her that Sack might have killed those two so as to end their suffering swiftly, but then she immediately dismissed the idea. A man like him didn't get to the position he held without becoming callously inured to this sort of incident.

Just as on other occasions like this, she noticed the sudden smell of shit, though this time the only collar failure was one that closed too quickly and all the way, severing a head and sending a spray of blood that even reached her desk. She closed up her palmtop, stood, picked it up and returned it to its pouch.

By now the choking sounds had ceased, though chests were still heaving and legs kicking. Serene abruptly stepped back, bored with this now, and realizing that though she had felt her malaise lift for a moment, it was back in force.

'Take me home,' she said to Sack, before heading for the door.

# Mars

Var slowly hauled herself to her feet, feeling weak, shaky and nauseous, and only just beginning to accept that she wasn't on the brink of dying. It was a strange mental state to emerge from; she had given up her responsibilities, had nothing to do, and how uncomfortable and filthy she felt had been irrelevant. But her anger at Rhone, for first trying to kill her out here on the surface of Mars, then leaving her to die when her oxygen ran out, helped her feel alive again. For this had not faded and now became the anchor that stabilized her. And her brother, who had miraculously crossed the solar system to bring her oxygen, seemed to inject some steel into her backbone with the steady regard of his weird pink eyes. She straightened up, gazed at him for a second, then transferred her attention to the vehicle he had arrived on.

The dust having rolled away, the machine was now clearly visible. On seeing its similarity to an early rocket-propelled precursor of vertical take-off jets she had christened it a 'flying bedstead' – and now felt no need to question that label. On the dusty rust-coloured ground rested a cube-shaped framework from which projected steering thrusters, one pointing towards Var and two pointing left and right, with presumably a fourth projecting from the other side. Within it, a single acceleration

chair faced up towards the sky, with hardware from the cockpit of a space plane installed in front of it. Behind the chair, two cylindrical fuel tanks had been mounted horizontally, and beneath them the main engine pointed towards the ground.

'I would have said "impossible to fly" had I not seen you flying it,' she rasped.

'The word "impossible" has always been given a severe battering throughout human history, and recently has been dealt a near fatal blow,' he reminded her.

She felt slightly demeaned by his dismissive attitude, and wished she hadn't used the word 'impossible' but instead enquired about the technicalities of flying such a machine. His remark had referred to this Rhine drive he had used to bring Argus Station here. Arrogant of him, she felt, but supposed it did seem pointless discussing the difficulties of flying the contraption that stood before her when he'd recently totally shafted conventional physics. She studied him and he seemed blank to her; not quite as human as the brother she had once known, but was she misremembering? Perhaps it was the effect of those . . . eyes, and the knowledge of everything he had managed to achieve?

'What happened to you, Alan?' she asked, trying hard to connect.

'I may retain that name, but little else of the brother you knew.' He glanced up the valley, seemingly impatient with her. 'We'll talk while we walk.'

Swallowing a snappy reaction, she waved a hand towards his vehicle. 'Can't this thing get us back to Argus?'

'No.' He turned and headed back towards it with the long gliding steps necessary here. 'An Earth-format space plane would have fallen like a brick in Martian atmosphere. I had to strip one down to achieve the correct weight-to-thrust ratio, and physically it could not include any more fuel than this used to

get me down here.' He reached up beside the seat and detached a backpack, pulled it down and slung it over one shoulder, and turned back to her.

'So we have to go to Antares Base?' she said.

He nodded. 'We have to get your Mars-format space plane flying again.'

'We don't have any fuel for that either.'

'Not a problem as, right now, my robots are constructing a drop canister to get some down to us.' He paused reflectively. 'It should come down, twenty hours hence, within just a few kilometres of the base.'

'But we do have the additional problem that I am no longer in charge,' she replied. 'Rhone is probably now in control of Antares Base, and its weapons.'

He waved a dismissive hand. 'Something to be dealt with in due course.'

He'd stolen a space station and all but destroyed the Committee, so perhaps had some reason for self-confidence, but she found his arrogance nevertheless distasteful. No matter what he had done, a single bullet could still kill him. He turned jerkily and began heading away, kicking up small clouds of dust. Var hesitated, not much in love with the idea of tagging along behind, of being in second place, then reluctantly acknowledged to herself that she was alive only because of him and she hurried to catch up, her legs leaden and a pain nagging in her chest from what was probably a cracked rib.

'Where are you heading?' she asked.

'There's a cave system leading from Coprates Chasma to that cave you were moving your base to. That will get us close without being seen.'

She had considered going that route herself, but just hadn't possessed a sufficient air supply. Noting the weight of the pack

he carried, she felt sure he must have brought extra oxygen bottles along. Yes, of course he'd brought extra; of course he would never make a stupid mistake like forgetting to bring enough air.

'So, tell me, Alan,' she said, moving up alongside him, 'how come you're here now?' It was merely a conversational gambit, and he accepted it as such.

'You could say,' he began, 'that my birth into this incarnation was from a plastic crate on the conveyor of the Calais trash incinerator . . .'

Throughout the Martian afternoon they trudged on up Coprates Chasma, with rouge dust hanging in the air over their trail while Saul, in terse and perfectly correct sentences, told her what had happened to him and what he had been doing over the last few years. Var was appalled. Her brother had always appeared pragmatic and mostly emotionless, yet there had never been any indication that he could also be so murderous. But, then, this person beside her was not quite the brother she had known and, in truth, she had previously never had any idea that she herself could become such a ruthless killer. Perhaps they shared the same genetic trait.

Their walk brought them to a triangular cave piercing a steep cliff and, as they scrambled over fallen rubble to reach it, Var realized that Alan seemed just as exhausted as she felt. But he finished his monologue.

'In a state comparable to unconsciousness, I had calculated that what we now call the Rhine drive was our only hope.' He shrugged. 'I was arrogant and I was wrong because Galahad's warship, the *Scourge*, still managed to intercept us.'

Var felt slightly surprised at this admission of error.

He halted and turned to look at her. 'Her troops boarded Argus and a lot of people died. We came close to losing and it

was only by my boarding the *Scourge* and penetrating its computer system that we managed to prevail.'

'So what did you do?' Var asked.

'I penetrated their ID implants and activated the biochips – killing them all with the Scour virus lying latent within them.' He faced forwards and moved on. 'We got the drive running again after that and hit the *Scourge*, which had retreated, with our drive bubble. That ship is back on course for Earth, and now doubtless full of corpses.' He paused contemplatively as they walked, then added, 'In reality the only person the Rhine drive actually saved was you.'

Var felt a surge of resentment at that, then shook it off as she contemplated all he had told her. So that was it: end of that chapter and turn over the page. He had summarized some of the most catastrophic events the human race had ever faced, also events that had opened out vast horizons; all had, as their root cause, himself. She found that somehow . . . unfair.

'So what now?' she asked, as they reached the cave mouth.

'You always wanted to build spaceships, Var – that is one memory I retain,' he replied. 'Give me your opinion of Argus Station, in that respect.'

She shivered and, despite her weariness, felt a sudden excitement. 'It was a stupid design.' Yes, it was, but she couldn't help feeling as if she was about to deliver a proposal to some Committee technology-assessment group.

'How so?' he enquired, flicking on his suit light to punch a beam into the dusty dark ahead.

'The initial aim was to build a ring station that could be spun up for centrifugal gravity. They first put in the structural supports and then began building the ring, and only realized halfway through that they had positioned it over the Traveller engine, so wouldn't be able to complete it if they intended to

use that engine again – which they did. Then, instead of moving the engine so that it pointed either up or down in relation to the ring's axis, they decided to turn the ring supports into the spindles for cylinder worlds, then went on to build the arcoplexes. It was a government hash from the start.'

'Very true,' Saul agreed.

'We'll have to move it,' Var opined.

'The engine or the station rim?' he asked.

'The Traveller engine, effectively, since we really need to get that asteroid out of there, cut it up and turn it into something useful.'

'So you propose a ring-shaped spacecraft with the engine jutting below?'

'I propose no such thing.'

He wasn't walking into the cave, just leaning a hand against the wall of stone as he waited to hear what she had to say. In just a short exchange, this conversation had moved on from apparently idle speculation. But she felt sudden misgivings. After all he had done, why would he need her expertise? Was he just offering a sop to her pride? No, she couldn't allow that thought to take hold: she could be just as good as him, just as successful. She closed her eyes for a second to try and remember the schematics of the Argus Station, and then consider what could be done with it.

'The Alcubierre warp,' she said, her eyes snapping open, 'what is its size and shape?'

'It *presently* generates at a diameter of seven kilometres – a kilometre from the station rim all round. It is oblate, with an axial thickness of four kilometres, though with half-kilometre indents at the poles.'

'I notice your emphasis on "presently",' remarked Var.

Saul nodded. 'Without the Argus asteroid at the centre of the station, the warp would be spherical.'

'So that changes the kind of ship you could build,' said Var. 'If you intend to retain the drive you already have.'

'True,' Saul agreed. 'What design of ship do you propose?'

'They were a little two-dimensional in their thinking when they built the station. If the ship itself was spherical, you could build in greater structural integrity, maybe even position new arcoplexes inside it and move the Traveller engine round and then out along one axis – that is, if you feel you need to retain that engine.'

'With the Rhine drive, we essentially fly blind,' he observed non-committal.

She couldn't help but feel he had been coaxing her to her next words. 'You've managed to create a warp drive – something long considered impossible in conventional physics circles – so what about Mach-effect propulsion?'

'I have been considering it,' he acknowledged. 'As with the Rhine drive, it may be that we already have a large portion of the necessary hardware in place simply with the EM field equipment.'

'I see.'

'So, what would you do first?'

'You'll need a lot of construction robots, and a lot more materials than you can obtain from the Argus asteroid. Robots first, then start building the skeleton of the sphere—'

He abruptly stepped away and gazed up at the sky.

'Brigitta and Angela,' he said, 'I have sent instructions to the system which concern you. When you've finished clearing that mess in there, I want Robotics operating at full production. I've also instructed Le Roque to give you everything you need.' He

paused for a second, listening to a response, before continuing. 'Yes, he's having the smelting plants extended.' He then turned to Var. 'It begins,' he explained. 'Shall we?' He gestured into the cave ahead then led the way in.

Of course, once they got deep inside the cave he would be out of contact with the computer systems of Argus Station. He'd set things in motion just then, which seemed fast for someone used to the bureaucratic delays and screw-ups usual in her previous employers. It was also exhilarating, but for the feeling that she was somehow being shifted into place like some game-piece.

# **Argus**

Hannah gazed at the swirling debris spreading out from the ringside bearing installation of Arcoplex Two, noting the flare of welders throughout the station amid constant robot and human activity.

'Madness,' she exclaimed in exasperation. 'He's risking our lives to save a sister he doesn't even remember.'

Even as she finished this outburst she felt mean and selfish and began to question her motivation. He wasn't risking their lives because they could survive without him. With the Rhine drive, they could now avoid anything Earth threw at them, and they probably also possessed enough expertise to repair the station and return it to self-sufficiency. Materials and energy wouldn't be a problem: the former could be gathered within the Asteroid Belt, or elsewhere in the solar system; while for the latter they could fly close to the sun, use their mirrors and solar arrays, and be away again before Galahad could send anything after them.

So why am I angry? Hannah wondered.

It was because she loved Saul and didn't want him to die. It was because, without him now, she would feel alone. No. That didn't really work. If she was truthful she had to admit she did not love him. She had once had an infatuation for the man he had previously been, when both man and infatuation had been human things. But loving the Alan Saul who rescued her from Inspectorate HQ London had seemed more akin to loving some especially efficient weapons system. And now he existed in an area far outside cosy one-on-one human relationships, having risen to the position of godhead or *Owner*, which was the title he had assumed out of contempt for all other titles, or perhaps arrogance. So what was bothering her?

Possessiveness.

Somehow he belonged to her, and she realized that this concern of his for his sister – his risking *his* life for this Var Delex, by flying that contraption of his to the surface of Mars, alone – was the source of her pique. She was jealous, and knowing that only annoyed her further. And, by Le Roque's silence over radio, she guessed her reaction had made him uncomfortable. He was embarrassed for her.

Hannah swung round to watch an ant-like construction robot emerging from one of the empty rooms inside the installation. It was clutching a human corpse in its big two-fingered forelimb. The corpse wore a grey vacuum combat suit painted with the symbol of the rising sun on the chest and back. This was not one of the *Scourge* assault troops Saul had killed with the Scour, for the head was missing and misty vapour trickled from numerous bullet holes. The corpse was off on its journey to be placed first in the hopper of a big robot normally used to carry construction materials, then conveyed, once that robot had a full load, to the overflowing rim mortuary. It struck Hannah

that this task must be now becoming quite familiar to the robots here.

'Did he have to kill them all?' she asked abruptly, then winced. Where had that come from?

'I'm guessing he didn't have time to be selective, Hannah.' Le Roque's tone sounded somewhat patronizing over the com link. 'And if he hadn't been so drastic, we might all either be dead or imprisoned by now.'

Yes, those were the plain facts, but she didn't want to apologize for her outburst. Why the hell should she? She'd been shot at, she'd killed people, become an unwilling participant in slaughter, damn it! Still, she pulled back on any further outbursts. Le Roque had suffered similar woes, and he had also lost friends. She realized she was behaving like a brat, and it was time to stop.

'So, what do we do while he's gone?' she enquired as she began heading for the arcoplex elevator at this end. 'Has he relayed any instructions?'

Le Roque emitted a dry laugh. 'Oh, he's given us some chores to be getting on with while he's out of contact in a cave system down there. The detail on them came close to crashing the system, until he slowed things down a little.'

'What?'

'We all have our instructions, and reconstruction is ramping up to the maximum possible given the limited power available, and we've restarted mining operations on the asteroid. I'm trying to get a handle on it, but it's not all obvious. He has some robots building a fuel drop tank for the Mars space plane down there, and Brigitta and Angela are running Robotics at full capacity.'

'More robots?' Hannah queried.

'More robots,' Le Roque confirmed, 'though we have to await some new schematics that he'll send once he's back in

contact. We also have provisional – but yet to be approved – designs for thousands of different station components, including what look like new arcoplex spindles.'

Arcoplex spindles? Hannah wondered as she stepped into the elevator. 'Okay,' she said, 'I'm heading back to my cabin now.' She cut the link.

Suddenly feeling very weary, Hannah leaned back against one wall of the elevator, almost glad that the damage to Arcoplex Two had made it necessary to cut its spin again. She was pleased not to have to trudge through an artificial one gravity to her quarters near her laboratory. As the doors opened to admit her to the arcoplex, she opened her suit visor and was immediately hit by the smell of burned plastic and cooked human flesh, and sharply reminded of what had happened here. To distract herself she thought about the meaning of the instructions Saul had issued.

He seemed to be mapping out the immediate future and keeping everyone busy, but what about afterwards? Obviously he was aiming to rebuild Argus Station, almost certainly turning it into the spaceship he had once named it. Doubtless he intended to ensure it was self-sufficient, manoeuvrable, powerful . . . and then? Did he intend to move against Earth or move away? Did she, in all honesty, have any chance of understanding his future aims and divining his present plans?

# Mars

Saul had understood, from the moment Var breathed easily again, that it was time to start acting and stop reacting. Images from Earth he had viewed during his descent to Mars showed that, while the *Scourge* had been out here hunting them, Serene

Galahad had not been idle. He counted at least ten mass drivers operating, the framework of three huge ships taking shape amidst the ever-expanding Mars Traveller construction station, also a structure down on Earth that already looked like a test bed for something similar to the Rhine drive. If he continued just *reacting* they would die, so he needed to work harder and faster than the sum industrial and technical might of Earth.

'We'll need more power than what's available out here,' said Var.

Saul focused his human facet on her, aware already that he was dealing with someone angry and prideful and little in love with being merely a subordinate. Whether his sister had always been like that he did not have sufficient memory of her to know. He also wondered if her recent experiences here might have changed her.

'Fusion should supply enough power to begin the work, but, yes, I agree: we need more power.' He turned and stepped into the cave. 'I'll take Argus close to the sun when we are done here.'

'And what do you intend to get done here?'

'As I said, I want to get the Mars-format space plane up and running,' he said. 'The people here will be relocated to Argus while I strip Antares Base of anything useful, like the fusion reactor.'

'You'll give them no choices?' she asked, apparently pleased by the idea.

'They can stay on Mars and die, if they so choose,' he said bluntly.

The floor of the cave was uneven, and in places they had to scramble over boulders, after which Saul found himself panting, despite weighing just over a third of what he weighed on Earth. Deeper in, he began to note calcite formations – the nubs of

stalactites and stalagmites that had never had a chance to get as big as anything similar on Earth. They had to be billions of years old.

'But, still, there is the problem of Rhone,' Var observed.

Saul grimaced, annoyed with himself now because he had not thought to bring a weapon. Just getting here and rescuing his sister had been an uncharacteristically overriding concern, while anything after that, down here, had seemed of little importance compared to everything else he had needed to do. Now, because he hadn't been paying attention, the problems down here could become critical. Once out in the open again, he could take over their systems, but there were no readerguns he could use to remove Rhone. He and Var could sneak in and maybe seize some weapons – he had confidence enough in his own abilities in that respect – but all that seemed untidy, and there was still a chance that one or both of them might get killed.

'What do you suggest?' he asked, turning to study her.

'I want to kill Rhone,' she said tightly, leaning against the cave wall and seemingly grateful for the pause. 'But that's personal. Maybe, if you can link me through, I can talk to the whole base – let Rhone and the rest know the situation and get their response.'

It was vague, imprecise.

'You could demand that Rhone step down,' he suggested.

'I don't want to be their leader.'

'You've fallen out of love with the idea?' Saul commented, moving on.

'Give me something to build and teams to command, and I'm fine. Making life-and-death decisions about people's future I'm not so fine with.'

Of course, her pride had taken a heavy blow, and now Saul

had offered her a way out. She wanted to deal with the nuts and bolts of a major space engineering project, as if that would be so much easier.

'I collected what data we have on you,' he said. 'On top of all your other qualifications you're a synthesist, which makes you much more qualified to lead people than many others who would like the job, including this Rhone. Sometimes the job chooses you and there are no other options.'

He considered Hannah up on Argus as he said this: how sometimes it was necessary to accept responsibility because really there was no one else who could.

They trudged on through the darkness with long slow steps, their suit lights stabbing ahead of them. In his mind, Saul tracked their position on an old seismic map of this cave, pausing occasionally to study his surroundings. Some hours of silence passed as they laboured on, at one point crossing the bed of an ancient underground stream scattered with rounded pebbles. As he paused to aim his light in each direction along the pipe cut through the rock on either side of them, Saul understood that Var's decision to take Antares Base underground had been the best one in the circumstances, but that would have come to nothing once the might of Earth reached out here. It really did not matter how capable were the individuals or minor groups scattered about the solar system, because they simply could not bring to bear the kind of resources Serene Galahad had available. He started to move on, but Var suddenly swore and sprawled on the ground.

'You okay?' he asked.

She got back up onto all fours, then probed her side with one hand. 'I need to rest.'

'Are you hurt?'

'Cracked rib, but that's not my main problem.' She stood

up. 'Thinking I was going to die, I didn't waste much of the little time I had left on sleeping.'

'We'll take a break here,' Saul said. 'Do you have food?' 'Some.'

'Then eat and rest.' Saul stepped over beside the wall of the stream bed and sat down, feeling grateful for a break himself. Var sat opposite him, sucking from her suit spigot for a while, but did not seem inclined to talk further. He watched her eyelids sag then finally close, detected the change in her breathing, and envied her – she'd fallen straight into a deep sleep. Checking his own physical condition, he felt no need for sleep, for he had slept long enough, but did feel the need for his body to recharge. He sucked from his own suit spigot – a protein paste packed with sugars, vitamins and minerals - until it was dry. He then switched over to fluids and gulped down a litre of some unidentifiable citrus liquid. Then he consciously ramped up the activity of his organs, cleaning out poisons and recharging all round, doing the best to bring his body to optimum efficiency in the shortest time. But even all this, involving considerable detail, occupied only a small portion of his intellect, so he considered other matters meanwhile.

Saul summoned up in his mind a schematic of the standard construction robot, along with ideas he had played with before about how it could be vastly improved. At present it was a singular machine and, though it looked like an ant, the idea of social insects had not been taken to its logical conclusion, and beyond. The robots must be designed as parts of a logical whole – all their components rendered interchangeable down to even their minds. Robots that consisted of three body parts and three sets of limbs should be made capable of both separating and conjoining. He visualized robots with just one body section and one pair of limbs mating up with similar fellows to create robots

with any number of body sections and pairs of limbs, even up to centipede monsters. Outlining this general idea, he next concentrated on the specific: the alloys and meta-materials to be used, the dimensions of all the components, a new design of processor to run a whole new kind of software. Seven hours later, by the time Var reopened her eyes, he had perfected every detail.

'I'm sorry about that,' she apologized.

'No problem at all,' he replied, standing up. He really didn't resent the delay at all because he felt stronger after those hours of respite, and knew he had designed something truly inspired, even for him.

When they moved on again, Var wanted to talk. Hours passed as she picked at him for details of recent events. In turn, he tried to fill in some of the blanks in his recollection of her history, and occasionally ventured to fill the blanks in his own. He thus learned more about their parents, about their sheltered upbringing, about the tutors he drained of knowledge and discarded, and his steady progress to adulthood. It was all distantly interesting, but Saul could find no emotional connection there. Really, Var was telling him stories about someone else. Then, coming with a kind of inevitability, her next question focused on something he had been skirting around within his own mind.

'So, you'll turn Argus Station into something bigger and better – a spaceship the like of which has never been seen before,' she said. 'Then what?'

There was the question. Until they first started up the Rhine drive, every effort made had been towards survival. Now the *Scourge* was no longer a problem and, with luck, it would be some time yet before Earth could send anything else against them.

'Then I leave,' he replied.

'Leave?'

'The solar system.'

'There will be some aboard Argus who won't like that.'

'I'd like to offer them an alternative, but that's not feasible. I could take Argus to Earth right now, but there are Earth's defences to consider and also the fact – which I have made plain to them – that their next destination once they set foot on Earth would be an adjustment cell.'

Glittering dust still hung in the air in front of them, even though it had been several days since the mining ahead had ceased. Many more hours had passed since their rest and, glancing at Var, Saul could see that she was again as weary as he himself felt. It would be better, he reckoned, if they did not approach the base in this state. Recollecting what he had seen on the way down, he said, 'There are some pressurized cabins at the head of the shaft this Martinez began opening out?'

'Yes – and I don't think Rhone would have had time to close them down.' She paused thoughtfully. 'In fact, I wonder what he is doing, and what he now thinks is best for the base. He must know by now that the *Scourge* isn't coming here, and that puts him in a bad position. The base either has to be moved underground entirely or everything that has already been moved underground has to be brought back to the surface. Will your people up above have spoken to him?'

'I left instructions for them to ignore any communications sent from anyone but me.'

'He'll be shitting himself,' said Var. 'He gambled on Serene Galahad and lost, so he might now be desperate enough to do something stupid.'

Metal glinted under their suit lights and in the next moment they stepped out onto an area of compacted rubble. Looking up, Saul could see, silhouetted against the night sky of Mars, the

scaffold leading up to the surface and the derrick above with the lifting platform firmly in place underneath it. No connection here with Argus which, by his calculation, sat just above the horizon and would fall behind it in just another half-hour. He would have liked to have put it geostationary above Antares Base but, with two moons whipping about out there, it was easier to put it into a stable orbit.

The cave directly ahead had been greatly enlarged and at their limit their suit beams vaguely picked out regular shapes: stacks of regolith blocks brought down from the old base, an ATV plus trailer, piles of equipment in plastic packing cases and other stacks of steel frames rescued from a geodesic dome. There were robots here, too, just a couple of them looming in the dark like steel herons. Saul reached out to them and found them on standby, but resisted the temptation to power them up and seize control of them. There seemed no point.

'We'll have to climb,' Var pointed out.

'Is that a problem for you?' Saul asked.

'Not at all.'

The low gravity made climbing so much easier. However, the low air pressure threatened to rack terminal velocity up high should either of them slip and fall. But, of course, as Saul reminded himself, his sister was quite well aware of that. He reached out and closed a hand on one of the nearest scaffold poles and found his grip firm. Without further ado, he began hauling himself upwards. It was easy enough, and he only had to pause once to rest, wedging himself between the pole and the rock wall of the shaft. Checking Var, he saw that, despite her cracked rib, she had not needed to rest. When he reached the top of the scaffold she was there to help him out onto the surface. He still wasn't up to full fitness and wouldn't be for some time yet.

'Thanks,' he said, because that was what you were supposed to say.

As he moved away from the shadow of the derrick he could sense the Antares Base computer network, far over to his left, like a three-dimensional flow diagram for a heating system. He could link into it from here, but there seemed no point at the moment. Instead he gazed at Argus over on the horizon. Now that its smelting plants were extended and gleaming like eves in dimly reflected sunlight, it reminded him of how it had looked from the surface of Earth. A second later he was fully connected with the station's computer system, whereupon he immediately inserted his new robot schematics, also instantly generating an order for the necessary materials from the smelting plants. Next he tracked down Brigitta Saberhagen to her cabin, checking recent history to discover that she had only gone to bed after being awake for nearly forty hours. He left her alone and instead found the connections to ten particular minds and riffled through them to find the one he wanted.

Judd was one of those minds. The proctor was an amalgam of human and machine, either an android or a cyborg, the product of research carried out in Humanoid Unit Development aboard this station. On discovering the proctors here and understanding the horror involved in that research, Saul had considered destroying them. But he had activated them, and now found them indispensable. In a way, they were more like him than any human aboard.

Judd was repairing and rerouting damaged optics leading from the Rhine drive to Tech Central, assisted by a human team of four people, one of them in an EVA unit. He sent Judd the schematics of the new robots, meanwhile idly checking what the other proctors were doing. Paul was in the Arboretum, pruning

shattered trees and replanting those that had been uprooted. Two more proctors were out on the Arboretum skin, working with human teams and construction robots to remove vacuum-penetration locks and to make repairs, while the rest were scattered around the station in similar pairs, doing similar work. They never slept, these proctors, though they did take time out for themselves, sitting like natives around technological campfires, communing in some manner Saul did not want to intrude on because he felt that seeing through their eyes was more than enough.

'Interesting,' said Judd.

'When you're done there, I want you to assist the Saberhagens,' said Saul. 'Let them take the lead, and only intervene if they start to go wrong.'

'I will be done in two hours.'

'Good.'

A further search now revealed Angela Saberhagen standing on a newly replaced glass floor above the robot factory, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. Saul initiated a connection through her fone.

'Don't you know those are bad for you?' he remarked.

'The least of my worries,' she said, taking another drag.

'How close are you to getting the factory up and running?' he asked.

'You already know,' she replied bluntly.

'Very well. I have a schematic for new robots for you to build, and the materials requisitions have gone to the smelting plants,' he said. 'I want you to retool as quickly as you can. Whenever you need to sleep, I want the work to continue, so I've sent Judd to assist.'

She gazed up at the nearest cam. 'New robots . . . How long before you start replacing us outdated humans, Alan?'

'That will never happen,' he replied, and cut the connection. It was, he considered, a relevant question. He could allow the people up there to update themselves in the same way he himself had been updated, but he knew what the inevitable result would be. They would then be in competition with him, his power would be diminished and some would try to take it away from him. He might lose control. This was the same fear that turned democracies into totalitarian regimes and he wasn't immune to it. In fact, he did not care to be immune to it. The people aboard Argus would remain under his heel until he found some viable way to be free of them, though for the moment, he wanted that way not to necessitate exterminating them.

Even as he considered this quandary he accessed some of the brain-implant designs Hannah had stored in her system. He needed something to raise the people there above simple humanity – which, as his new robots came online, would be all but obsolete – but not something likely to raise them beyond his control. Where, though, in the plans developing both inside and outside his skull, to insert human beings? He saw them as control nexuses: either mentally controlling subgroups of robots or else controlling complex telefactored machines. Transforming them to his purpose would seem as dictatorial as the Committee, but what use were they to him if they were not . . . useful?

'So how are things there?' asked Var.

He pointed to the station. 'The smelting plants are extended. One of them is already at work, while the other will be ready within a few hours. The robot factory will start producing our workers within that time too.'

'We just need to get back there, then,' she said, turning away and striding over to one of the cabins.

Saul hurried after her, crammed himself into the small

airlock with her, and soon the both of them were inside the cabin itself. Var immediately undid her helmet and took it off.

'At last,' she said, then turned and stepped through a door into the small washroom and toilet.

Saul removed his helmet and sniffed the stale air before surveying his surroundings. Along one wall of the cabin stood a single workbench loaded with equipment: dismantled electric motors, some hydraulic rams, a vice and a wide selection of hand tools that were run from pressure lines coiling down from a pipe along the ceiling. The rest of the room was occupied by a scattering of chairs around a low table improvised from food and drink boxes, with similar boxes stacked by the near wall, some foam mattresses and rolled-up sleeping bags, and a single desk with an old-style computer sitting on it, optics leading up from this machine into the ceiling.

He sat down at the desk to turn on the computer, and what had been a hazy and distant network suddenly etched itself into his brain as the computer connected to Antares Base and he linked to it via its modem. He slowly began to open up the bandwidth and explore, sampling here and there until he found the protection securing the computer in Mars Science, which he broke with a thought. He then speed-viewed the recorded exchanges between Rhone and Serene Galahad, understood the man's fears, lack of imagination and naivety, and moved on to locate the cam network and see what the base staff were doing.

The medical bay contained four bullet-riddled corpses on gurneys, while a doctor Saul soon identified as Da Vinci sat on the floor with his back against the wall, drinking some concoction out of an Erlenmeyer flask – probably surgical alcohol cut with fruit juice. Sixty of the personnel were confined to their rooms, each room locked down from Mars Science, while the rest occupied a community room. Those who were armed were

gathered about Rhone himself on one side of the room, most of the rest sat in nervous silence while a few of them were arguing with Rhone and those accompanying him.

They wanted assurances but he now no longer had any to give them. He spoke eloquently of the tragic deaths of Var Delex and Lopomac, and expressed his displeasure at how some had sought to blame these deaths on him. The 'some' were, Saul suspected, those four corpses in Da Vinci's surgery. No one believed him, even those around him with the guns, but those busy arguing obviously weren't prepared to state that outright. He talked about how they must now work together to survive and how the damage done during that lunatic move underground must be swiftly reversed. When they asked about Argus, he told them it was irrelevant, since there was no way anyone on the station could get to them. It seemed everything Saul was hearing had already been said and that Rhone was now reaching the end of his patience. The people were dismissed to their rooms with the instruction to await their work orders, and a warning that disobedience would not be tolerated. Saul withdrew – he now knew all he needed to know.